Mary Munsell Abroe

Observing the Civil War Centennial

Rhetoric, Reality, and the Bounds of Selective Memory

Americans of the early cold war period beheld an eminently usable past as they anticipated the centennial of the Civil War. Popularized in the 1950s through the narrative wizardry of Bruce Catton and Allan Nevins, the distant struggle offered heroic images that could comfort and inspire as they provided diversion from an uneasy present. With citizens' attention fixed upon subversive threats—real or imagined—to democratic institutions, the vision of a United States tested and fortified in the crucible of civil conflict offered reassurance that the nation could meet any crisis and emerge victorious.

Such use of the Civil War legacy placed Americans at mid-century squarely in the tradition of other generations of commemorators who employed that legacy—or a selectively remembered version of it—to promote a contemporary agenda. Like veterans who led the crusade to create federal battlefield parks in the 1890s, centennial planners found their philosophical base in a celebration of reunion and the glorification of American martial courage and devotion to principle. The need to articulate ideals that could unite northerners and southerners while circumventing potentially disruptive issues was essential to the success of both memorial enterprises, thus shaping the way in which each exploited America's Civil War heritage. Battlefield preservationists at the turn of the 20th century appealed to the decade's nationalistic spirit to generate bipartisan backing. Latter-day commemorators found the road to consensus rougher in the 1960s.

In the vanguard of centennial planning at the national level was the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission. Authorized by Congress in 1957, the commission capped a lobbying effort supported by a network of study groups called Civil War round tables and directed by a cadre of civic, professional, and political leaders. Such elites were conspicuous in the body as first constituted by President Eisenhower and other officials. Perhaps none was more conspicuous than chairman U.S. Grant III, a career soldier and grandson of the Civil War military leader. With General Grant and executive director Karl Betts, a Baltimore businessman, at the helm, the commission sought to foster social cohesion by championing themes of national unity and American bravery under fire. As the commemoration unfolded, the goal of promoting that ideology endured; the reality of racial discrimination and the dissension that it generated, however, proved substantial stumbling blocks along the way. In fact the centennial was just a few months old when the choice of segregated facilities for an official function of the federal commission drew wide media coverage and resulted in swift presidential intervention. It also brought an end to the leadership of Grant and Betts, who had failed to avert the public relations disaster, by late 1961.

Observance of the Emancipation Proclamation's centennial offered a microcosmic view of the rhetoric and reality of American race relations 100 years after the Civil War. Columbia University's Allan Nevins, who replaced General Grant, planned the main ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial on September 22, 1962, the centennial anniversary of the document's promulgation soon after the battle of Antietam. Although Nevins thought that President Kennedy had agreed to deliver the main address, Kennedy refused the invitation at the 11th hour—apparently in concern over negative political fallout from an appearance that might affront white southerners.[1] Adlai Stevenson, then ambassador to the United Nations, filled in for the chief executive. Kennedy sent his brother Robert and a recording in which he admitted that "vestiges of discrimination and segregation" endured but also listed much about which to be encouraged: "...progress in education, in employment, in the evenhanded administration of justice, in access to the ballot...[and] in public and private life."[2] Keynote speaker Stevenson, however, did not share the President's optimism. Instead he asked if citizens who might cast the cold war struggle in terms of good and evil, perceiving their nation as "the land of the free" and their adversaries as "pitch black," deserved the title "pure-souled defenders of freedom" when many African Americans still were denied the vote and access to equal opportunity.[3]

Nor was Judge James Parsons, the first African American appointed to a federal district

judgeship in the continental United States, as sanguine as President Kennedy in his assessment of black "progress." Speaking before crowds at Lincoln's tomb in Springfield, Illinois during ceremonies sponsored by the American Negro Emancipation Centennial Authority of Chicago, Parsons concluded that Lincoln would be "aflame with anxiety and impatient concern that emancipation of the American Negro has been but half completed—when there lies ahead of us shockingly so little time in which to complete it." Judge Parsons predicted doom for a civilization whose technology had far outstripped its morality unless blacks were "accepted in every facet of life—not merely with a pretense toward equality—but with a feeling of identity."[4]

While the federal centennial commission attended to commemorations of general importance like that of the Emancipation Proclamation, it urged states and localities "to plan and commemorate the chief events of...[their] history during the great national crisis."[5] Most states formed energetic commissions that followed this recommendation by fostering the involvement of communities, organizations, and individuals in the discovery of their Civil War past. Activities for schoolchildren, encouragement of grass-roots searches for documents and relics, and the development and promotion of sites with Civil War ties were common features of state programs.

Heritage tourism flourished during the early 1960s as the public converged on war-related areas of local import and especially on federal battlefield parks. Scenes of commemorative rituals that typically included monument dedications and performances by politicians who used the opportunity to offer their own version of the Civil War's meaning, historic combat sites attracted record numbers of American visitors. In battlefield venues, however, the activity that kindled the most intense interest was re-enacting, which emerged in its modern form during the 1950s to become a popular commemorative and interpretive vehicle during the centennial and beyond.

While sham battles usually climaxed with pretend enemies striking a conciliatory pose, re-enacting generated its share of opposition and controversy during the early 1960s. National commission member Bruce Catton, for example, expressed the troubling side of the activity for himself and others when he asked rhetorically of a Richmond audience: "Is it proposed to re-enact the burning of cities, the march to the sea, the appalling bloodshed of this most sanguinary conflict."[6] Neither U.S. Grant III nor Allan Nevins favored the practice. Nevins stated flatly that "if the National Commission tries to re-enact a battle, my dead body will be the first found on the field."[7] General Grant was uncomfortable with re-enacting in the abstract, but conceded that such exercises were effective in sparking young people's interest in history. For that reason, perhaps, his name appeared on the letterhead of the First Manassas Corporation, organizer of the first major re-enactment of the centennial.

The national commission did not formally sponsor the event, but it cooperated with planners and so became identified with the July 1961 simulation of the battle of First Bull Run. National Guardsmen and members of re-enactment groups presented phases of the contest over three days for 70,000 spectators who paid $4.00 for grandstand seating, $2.50 for rental of a folding chair, or stood at no charge.[8] Although the spectacle culminated with "Federals" and "Confederates" joining to sing "God Bless America," the superficial harmony belied a problem-filled affair. Heat exhaustion as well as bayonetings and other accidents in the midst of "battle" felled a number of "soldiers." A more fundamental issue was that many on both sides appeared intent on refighting the Civil War. One participant noted his fear that some "drunken hothead would decide to really let fly with a Minie ball"[9] during the re-enactment.

Subsequent media condemnation of the event reinforced reservations about further involvement in re-enactments on the part of the Civil War centennial commission and the National Park Service, which permitted the mock battle to be held in Manassas National Battlefield Park. The fact that some injured re-enactors tried to sue the NPS for failure to take safety precautions no doubt contributed to the agency's misgivings about hosting similar events. Criticism that re-enactments trivialized the loss of human life and basic tragedy of war converged with issues of resource protection and persuaded the service to institute its current policy prohibiting battle simulations in national parks.[10]

In their report to Congress, federal commissioners summarized the bounds of contention over re-enacting as a commemorative and educational device:

> Defenders asserted that re-enactments provided realism, color and pageantry, that they enabled a great many people to take a direct part in the Centennial, and that they brought authentic sights and sounds of the Civil War to even greater numbers of people. The opponents...deplored the intrusions of commercialism and a carnival atmosphere which, they stated, were an affront to good taste and an abuse to history. The debate over this question was never resolved.[11]

Sponsorship of re-enactments was in many cases the province of state commissions, while

local committees or private organizations oversaw the planning and execution of numerous such events that marked the anniversary. The federal centennial commission distanced itself from the practice but had no authority to prevent sham battles, which enjoyed substantial popular support.

Ironically, commission members who collectively stressed martial valor as a centennial theme were individually among the most outspoken critics of re-enacting. Commissioners thus found themselves in a situation to which they contributed (if not one of their making) by promoting American bravery under fire as a principal motif. As for participants and their goals, re-enacting enabled them to memorialize what they found most meaningful or reconstruct the image of the Civil War that they found most appealing. The practice allowed those so inclined to shun painful truths and lose themselves in theatrics. Recreating the sensory experience of combat facilitated avoidance of such visceral issues as slavery, racism, and the meaning of disloyalty, while focusing the attention of spectators and re-enactors on communal virtues—physical courage, commitment to principle, devotion to duty—of which all could be proud. The heroic and inspirational past that mainstream America sought from the centennial came to life as re-enacting captured the popular imagination.

At the same time, a chorus of voices emerging from the anniversary observance revealed other ways in which citizens employed their Civil War past to serve the present. Against the backdrop of a peaking civil rights movement, those who took the podium on occasions like the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation reminded white Americans about the war's unfinished business and urged them to live up to ideals of equality and justice. The following summer, Gov. George Wallace of Alabama invoked a different memory of the Civil War when he addressed those gathered in July 1963 to dedicate South Carolina's new monument at Gettysburg. Wallace capitalized on his battlefield appearance to vindicate his own resistance and that of other southern states to federal desegregation efforts then underway. He thus informed Americans that "South Carolina and Alabama stand for constitutional government and thousands of people throughout the nation look to the South to restore constitutional rights and the rights of states and individuals."[12]

Vice President Hubert Humphrey drew the centennial observances to a close with a 1965 speech at ceremonies at Bennett Place near Durham, North Carolina, where Joseph Johnston and a decimated Confederate army of 15,000 surrendered to William T. Sherman two weeks after Appomattox. In a period of mounting American entanglements elsewhere in the world and intensified racial turmoil at home, Humphrey asked listeners for restraint, equating the "radicalism" of Reconstruction with a "senseless, revengeful extremism that even today, if left unchecked, could bring our great democracy to its knees."[13] At a time when the Dunning interpretation of Reconstruction was undergoing thorough revision, the vice president used that longstanding view of the era to cultivate a southern audience and so advance the solidarity that was essential as the nation confronted serious problems at home and abroad.

The 1950s saw citizens increasingly apprehensive about imperiled freedoms and national security in a seemingly alien and unfamiliar postwar world. Such fears prompted Americans to embark on a quest for an epic, reassuring and, above all, recognizable past—one that they hoped to find in the Civil War. As the anniversary ran its course, however, the difficulties inherent in memorializing a war that validated nationhood and abolished slavery but left racism intact emerged clearly. The fact of a racially divided society and the discord that it spawned were genuine impediments to the unity of purpose and civic harmony sought by anniversary planners of the mid-20th century. The commemoration of 1961-1965 illustrated well Americans' diverse centennial perceptions of the Civil War and testified to the historical amnesia still prevalent in some quarters after 100 years of remembering.

Notes

1 Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 599; and John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 210-11.

2 *New York Times*, 23 September 1962, p. 50.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, *Guide for the Observance of the Civil War Centennial* (Washington, DC: U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, 1959), 5.

6 *Richmond News-Leader*, 2 May 1961, p. 10; quoted in Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 605.

7 Quoted in U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, The Civil War Centennial: A Report to Congress (Washington, DC: U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, 1968), 14.

8 *New York Times*, 24 July 1961, p. 8.

9 Quoted in Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1984), 143.

[10] See NPS Director Conrad With's memorandum to Regional Director, Region One, 14 August 1961, Bureau Historian's files, History Division, National Park Service, Washington, DC. for the inaugural policy statement on re-enacting within national parks. At present the National Park Service permits living history presentations of camp life or military evolutions (i.e., maneuvers) within the confines of its properties; the agency forbids re-enactments that include simulations of casualties being taken or weapons being fired at opposing lines (i.e., at human beings). James D. Bigley, "Living History and Battle Reenactment: The Dilemna of Selective Interpretation," *History News*, November/December 1991, 16; and Edwin C. Bearss, telephone conversation with author, 14 March 1991.

[11] Civil War Centennial Commission, Report to Congress, 44-45.

[12] "Gettysburg: 'The Task Remaining,'" *Newsweek*, 15 July 1963, 18.

[13] "Newsletter" of North Carolina Confederate Centennial Commission, 1962-1965, Records of the Civil War Centennial Commission, box 85, [RG 79, National Archives]; quoted in Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 224.

Mary Munsell Abroe, Ph.D., is a lecturer in the Department of History at Loyola University, Chicago. She is also a trustee for the Preservation of Civil War Sites.

Martin Blatt

Hope and Glory

The Centennial Celebration of the Monument to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment

In May 1997, Boston celebrated the centennial of the installation of the Augustus Saint-Gaudens Monument to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, located on the Boston Common. It proved to be a highly successful and stirring public history program.

Background of the 54th Massachusetts

Shortly after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the abolitionist Massachusetts Governor John Andrew received permission to organize the first regular army unit of free blacks in the North. Because his own state's African-American population was too small to fill the regiment, Andrew gained the cooperation of scores of black recruiters, most notably Frederick Douglass, to enlist volunteers from virtually every northern state. Supporters of the project faced blistering racism and scornful opposition to the idea of placing blacks in uniform.

The heroism of the first Union regiments of former slaves, such as those in Louisiana or the First South Carolina Volunteers, commanded by the Massachusetts abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, began to break down prejudice against the idea of using black troops. Yet it remained the task of the 54th Massachusetts, as it was called, led by Boston's Shaw, to prove conclusively the wisdom of black recruitment. The success of the state's most important black regiment, especially its valor at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, on July 18, 1863, where many, including Shaw, died in a heroic but failed attempt to take the fort, paved the way for the enlistment of the 179,000 blacks who wore Union blue and helped win the Civil War.

Saint-Gaudens Monument

In 1865, some black veterans and citizens of South Carolina attempted to create a monument to Shaw near Fort Wagner itself. Though the plan failed, a group of Bostonians, including Governor Andrew, Senator Charles Sumner, Colonel Henry Lee, and Joshua B. Smith (a former fugitive slave who once worked with the Shaw family), began raising funds for a monument in Boston. It took several years before Saint-Gaudens was commissioned to do the work and several more years for the work to be completed and installed on May 31, 1897.

The Monument is an extraordinary piece of public art, one of the most important and powerful in the United States. The bronze sculpture portrays Shaw and 23 black infantry volunteers. The three-dimensional figures of Shaw and his horse emerge from a bas-relief background of marching men.